

# Maurice Hinchey NEWS

## 26<sup>TH</sup> CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT, NEW YORK

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### HINCHEY COMMENTS ON WATERSHED PROTECTION

KINGSTON - U.S. Representative Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) on Wednesday submitted the following comments at a hearing held by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Boiceville. The EPA was seeking public comment on New York City's watershed protection programs and its plan to avoid filtering drinking water from its Catskill/Delaware water supply system.

"Protecting the Catskill/Delaware watershed is an enormous undertaking. The 1997 Agreement established a framework for protection of the watershed by creating a multitude of programs. It is an imperfect agreement, and one that may ultimately prove inadequate to provide the necessary protections to avoid filtration. There are literally hundreds of steps and decisions within the Agreement requiring implementation. To date, progress has been slow and much more commitment is needed from the EPA, city and state to implement the Agreement. With the next filtration avoidance determination due in April of 2002, it is imperative for the city and state to step up their efforts. If the present course is allowed to continue, water quality will decline to the point where construction of enormously expensive filtration systems will be unavoidable. At this point, one of the purest and most wholesome water supply and distribution systems ever constructed will have suffered a serious and irreversible decline. No one can afford to let this happen.

"Filtration must be avoided at all costs, as it would have adverse consequences on many levels. Protecting the natural functions of the watershed is a prudent investment and should be the highest priority of the Agreement. Once a watershed is irreparably degraded, the ecological system cannot be restored. Preserving the quality of our waters is far cheaper and safer than trying to correct degradation through filtration. Protecting these water resources benefits both local communities and the city since we drink the same water. Detrimental activities will harm not only the city's supply, but also the smaller reservoirs and wells that supply us locally. If the city's water supply is degraded to the point of requiring filtration, so too will ours. Not only is filtration a tremendously expensive proposition for the city, but it would place tremendous financial burdens on our local communities as well. And filtration is not wholly reliable. Degraded water sources that are filtered still run the risk of microbial contamination that can cause severe health problems in people.

"And it's doubtful that the city would be willing to make the same level of investment in watershed protection if its ordered to build an expensive filtration system. Should filtration be necessary, it would be much easier to operate under the premise that we don't need to be so

prudent in protecting the watershed. This would exacerbate additional pressures for detrimental activities.

"It is therefore imperative that any activities that compromise or diminish the quality of our waters be avoided. Protecting the watershed will preserve the way of life and long-term character of our region that makes it attractive to live here. Increasingly, sprawl is threatening the region. The office parks, the big-box retailers, the suburban subdivisions, the "estate communities," the second-home developments are all beginning to encroach on the watershed. The larger the development, the bigger its footprint and detrimental impact on the watershed. The need for smart growth is mentioned in the Agreement and the state should be doing more to promote it. Too often, tax subsidies create incentives for development that induces growth outward and eats up greenspace. Instead, the state should encourage business reinvestment in existing cities and villages such as Kingston and Ellenville, in order to keep jobs close to our communities and promote redevelopment of existing business districts.

"The city and state need to do more to promote economic development that is compatible with watershed protection. At the federal level I am working to promote economic development activities in our region that will provide for sustainable jobs. I believe people can continue working their land in farming and forestry while enhancing watershed protection. For example, funding through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service has been very successful in reducing contaminated runoff from farms. Funding through the U.S. Forest Service is assisting forest owners improve forestry practices on their lands and expanding economic opportunities for wood products. I will continue to seek funding for these types of programs.

"Unfortunately, the city is not moving expeditiously enough to upgrade septic systems. As noted in the midcourse review of May 2000, while some work has been done to replace septic systems, the city is not moving fast enough. There are 38,000 septic systems in the watershed; up to half of these need to be improved. Only 1,300 out of the roughly 15,000 systems needing improvement have been upgraded. The city is also behind schedule in upgrading sewage treatment plants beyond tertiary treatment. Roughly 35 of these are in our region. These efforts are woefully inadequate and clearly the city needs to allocate greater resources to get the job done.

"Much more work needs to be done protecting the natural functions within the watershed. Wetlands are nature's filtration system and protecting them is critical for preserving water quality. Currently, only wetlands over 12.4 acres are protected. Clearly we cannot afford to keep losing wetlands and DEP must give them greater protection. Maintaining setbacks and buffer zones along streams are also critically important for protecting water quality, preventing polluted run-off and erosion. Unless progress is made to maintain protected buffers and wetlands protection, steady degradation of water quality will occur. Where these functions occur on private lands that border streams, it is in the city's best interest to provide incentives for good stewardship of these sensitive areas.

"One area where the city has done a fairly good job is on land acquisition. This makes the city the largest taxpayer in the Catskills. The city should not seek to avoid paying real property taxes and school taxes. These lands are the best investment the city can make in its future, and it should pay its taxes happily and promptly in order to be a better neighbor to our region.

"Allowing appropriate recreational access to these lands would help forge a more productive and trusting relationship between the city and our region. Many people living in this area enjoy the recreational opportunities that the reservoirs and surrounding lands provide. The city should allow all licensed recreational sporting activities on watershed properties.

"My hope in offering these comments now is that the EPA, the state and the city can make adjustments and increase the prospects that the city will qualify for an extension of its filtration avoidance determination next April."

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